Attribution Theory

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Attribution theory is a topic within the field of social psychology which seeks to explain the cognitive process whereby individuals make explanatory inferences regarding the causes of events. Fritz Heider (1958) was among the first to analyze the process of attribution. Heider distinguished between two general categories of explanation, internal and external. Internal attributions implicate characteristics of the individual (such as ability, attitudes, personality, mood, and effort) for having caused a particular behavior, whereas external attributions implicate external factors (such as the task, other people, or luck) for causing an event or outcome to occur. While Heider established that successes and failures are interpreted by an individual within this causal framework, Weiner (1971) added an additional dimension to causal interpretation when he proposed that the stability of the cause is also included in individual’s explanations of outcomes. The distinction between stable, non-variable causes (such as innate ability for internal attributions and inherent task difficulty for external attributions) and unstable, variable causes (such as effort and luck respectively) was combined with Heider’s internal/external dimension to form a basis for classifying the performance attributions made by individuals (Martinko 1998).

Following the emergence of two-dimensional attribution theory, many studies have been conducted which observed patterns governing the type of attribution which individuals tend to make in given situations. Three phenomena which are commonly observed when studying attributions are the actor-observer bias, the fundamental attribution error, and the self-serving bias. The actor-observer bias is the phenomenon where the perceived cause of an event follows from the particular perspective of the explainer. An observer of an individual’s behavior displays a tendency to attribute the causes of that behavior to internal characteristics of the actor whereas the person carrying out the act in question explains their own behavior as having resulted from external circumstances (Jones & Nisbett 1971). The fundamental attribution error refers to a general bias on the part of an observer, whereby individuals tend to explain the behavior of others in terms of internal factors to a greater extent than situational factors (Jones & Harris 1967). This bias is also manifested in explanations for group behavior, and in this context is termed the ultimate attribution error (Allport 1954). Finally, self-serving bias is a common pattern of explanation for personal success or failure and refers to the tendency for individuals to explain success as internally derived and failure as resulting from external, situational factors (Zuckerman 1971). These three patterns of attribution type exhibit fallacious and biased reasoning in action.
In 1967, Harold Kelley attempted to explain the cognitive process by which people generate internal or external explanations with his tripartite attribution cube. Kelley first postulated that attributions arise through the use of the principle of co-variation. This principle of inferential logic holds that the cause of an event must be present when the event occurs and absent when the event fails to occur. Kelley proposed that individuals observe three types of covariant data when assessing the causal origin of behavioral events. Consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness are all considered when interpreting the cause of a behavior. Consensus refers to whether others behave identically in the given situation. Consistency refers to whether the individual behaves identically from case to case in the given situation. Distinctiveness refers to whether the individual behaves identically when the given situation is changed. In other words, distinctiveness describes whether the behavior is unique to the particular circumstance or manifests across a wide variety of circumstances. Kelley proposed that the levels of these three behavioral co-variables provide the informational basis or assessing the behavior of a person. Kelley’s attribution cube predicts that if consensus is perceived as high (everybody behaves this way in this scenario), consistency is perceived as high (the individual always behaves this way in this given scenario), and distinctiveness is perceived as high (the behavior is unique and distinct to the given scenario), then the circumstances of an event will be attributed as having caused the action. On the other hand, the cube predicts that if consistency is high (the individual always behaves this way in this scenario) while both consensus and distinctiveness are low (nobody else acts this way in this scenario, and he always acts like this regardless of the scenario), then the traits of the individual will be implicated as having caused an event. Other combinations of behaviorally covariant information result in ambiguity as to the locus of causation in the mind of the observer who is attempting to interpret whether external social circumstances or internal traits caused a particular behavior to occur.

Weiner’s theory is generally used to interpret achievement-related attributions while Kelley’s cube is used to interpret the informational basis of social attributions; however, these two approaches are not mutually exclusive. Kelley’s informational perspective is compatible with Weiner’s dimensional approach (Martinko 1998). The consensus, consistency, and distinctiveness information of Kelley’s model provides a basis for external/internal, stable/unstable, and global/specific attributions within Weiner’s performance explanation model (Martinko 1998). The sound predictions of this synthesized theory of attribution provide evidence that Weiner and Kelley were describing two compatible aspects of a common underlying process of attribution which is employed universally (Martinko 1998).